

Robert Johnson USAR #21
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Q: Mr. Johnson, when did you join the Navy?

A: I joined the Navy in 1940; the early part of 1940.

Q: Why did you decide to join the Navy?

A: Well, at that particular time, it was during the depression and I had started to college and dropped out; went to Kansas City, tried to find a job, couldn't find a job and decided to join the service.

Q: And what made you chose the Navy over say, the Army?

A: Well, I guess because I thought I would like boats better than I'd like land.

Q: What was the first ship you were assigned to?

A: USS *Utah*.

Q: When did you go to Hawaii with the *Utah*?

A: Well, I went aboard the *Utah*, if I remember right, in April, 1940, and we were only aboard ship a few days when we left for the Hawaiian Islands, for our first tour of duty there.

Q: Between the time you joined the *Utah* in April of 1940 and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, what rank had you advanced to?

A: I was only a Seaman First Class.

Q: So you were a Seaman First Class on Dec. 7th?

A: Yes. I had taken the exam for Third Class but I had only taken it 3 days before the War started, and therefore there were no records of it, so when the War started, I was a Seaman First.

Q: What was your regular duty?

A: I was a coxswain of a motor launch aboard the *Utah*.

Q: What sort of work did you normally do?

A: Just general deck work, but after I was assigned to the coxswain of the motor launch, (I started out in the boat crew and advanced to coxswain) it mainly was maintenance of our boat; keeping it in good shape.

Q: What did you do on Sat., night, Dec. 6th?

A: Saturday night, Dec., 6th, I went ashore and went into Honolulu.

Q: Remember what you did then?

A: Basically not too much, except walked around downtown. I was with another friend, we went to a restaurant and had dinner that evening. In fact, I believe it was the famous Wo [*Fat*] where we had a sandwich and something to drink.

Q: About what time did you get back to the ship?

A: About 11:00.

Q: Where were you berthed? Where was your bunk?

A: I was in the 3rd Division. It was about 3/4 of the way in the rear of the ship (what we called the rear.)

Q: How many decks down were you?

A: Two decks down.

Q: What time did you get up on Dec. 7th?

A: Well, I had the duty that day and my first duty was to be at precisely 8:00 or just before 8:00, we were to take a church party ashore. So, I had got up at about 6:30 and we had breakfast and I had dressed in my sneakers, and white pants, and outfit that we wore on the boat, and was waiting to be called away, playing cards (Pitch or something) with a good buddy of mine.

Q: Which side of the ship?

A: As we were sitting, I was on the port side.

Q: So you were on the port side?

A: I was on the Harbor side, so to speak, away from Ford Island.

Q: How did you first notice that anything out of the ordinary was happening?

A: Well, the first thing we heard or felt, was really a tremendous "thud" and shudder of the ship. The whole ship just shuddered and my friend D.I., who was calmly sitting across from me had been in the Navy quite a bit longer than I had, and (tape slips) "Well, let's go up and see what crazy so and so rammed us." He thought that maybe a ship coming into port that morning had tried to tie up alongside of, or maybe it had gotten away from the Skipper or from a tug and had just bumped into us real hard. Soon (I don't know how many it seems like really seconds at that particular point) we had just started to get up. We were sitting on a bench type seat and we started to get up when the next one hit. It turned out to be a torpedo.

Q: What did it feel like?

A: It just really felt like a tremendous vibration of the Ship really, more than an explosion. But I guess being where the first one was located and under the water line and so forth, it just shook everything, just tremendously. Then when the next one hit, it felt like it was almost in the compartment above us...I mean in front of us to the bow side of the Ship, and at that particular time we knew something was amiss, other than somebody just running into us.

Q: What did you do then?

A: Well, like I said, we started to go to the ladder to go topside and when the second one hit, we had some temporary lockers sitting in there, that hadn't been bolted down yet, because we had some new crew members come aboard, and these lockers fell over; that's how tremendous the shudder was. Just about that time over the loud speaker came the word to man our battle stations; that it was a Japanese air attack. Well, everybody rushed to the ladder, particularly the new crew members, and my friend D.I., calmly said, "Let's wait or we'll get trampled to death. We'll get out." And then just following that they come over and said abandon ship. And we were already starting to roll at that particular time.

Q: Did you proceed to abandon ship?

A: Yes, we waited until the scramble was a little bit over with and went up last up the ladder. And when we got to the first deck, water was coming in the portholes. And we went on up the 2nd ladder to topside and by this time the ship was on an angle. The first thing we saw when we came up from the hatch, looked over towards Pearl City, was a Japanese plane just as it came in and banked, and we saw the big red balls. That was really the first time that it really hit me that it could really be a Japanese air attack. Up to that point it just seemed impossible that they could be there.

Q: What were your gut feelings then when you saw that?

A: My gut feeling was I was scared, and my next gut feeling was this just can't be happening to us. And like I say, this buddy D.I., calmly that had been in the Navy a good while; he'd been out in the China Fleet, and he'd been under attack once before in the Yangtze River when they had a little skirmish out there.

Q: Had he been on the *Panay*?

A: He was on a ship in the Yangtze River, called the USS *Gold Star*. And he was looking all around. I, myself, was not really paying much attention. I was scared and had never been in this situation before. We started to go down to the gun turret and he almost tackled me and knocked me down, and right in front of us went the strafing; they were strafing. He had been smart

enough to be looking. We got up from there and started around the gun turret, over towards the side of the Ship. My first inclination was that I was going to jump off the port side which was the way the Ship was rolling towards. And he said of course it's going to roll over on us. I mean we'll be sucked under. We'll go up and jump off the other side. We were by that time almost crawling on our hands and knees, because the ship was at such an angle. We got up to the railing, and I looked down, and of course the big belly of the Ship was sticking up by that time and I said, "We can't jump, we'll hit the side of the ship!" and he said, "We'll jump anyway!" So we jumped and we did of course hit the blister of the Ship, and scraped our legs up a little bit. But we had kicked off our, (I had on tennis shoes, he had on regular shoes) kicked off our tennis shoes as we got to the railing, and we jumped in the water, and swam to Ford Island.

Q: Did you have to swim around the Ship to get over to Ford Island?

A: No, we jumped off and swam directly to Ford Island. There were some trenches; they were doing some kind of either sewer work or some kind of work in front of the officers homes there on Ford Island. And these trenches were there, I guess they were about 5 feet, 6 feet deep. It appeared to be that deep anyway. And a Lieutenant Halk who had been one of the Division Officers aboard ship, was in our group as we got there, and he told us all to jump into this ditch. We went down in there and he told us to stay in there and he'd be back in a little bit, and he left. We didn't know where he was going; he didn't say. But he crawled out of the trench. My recollection of time, which was kind of tough at that time, it seems he was gone about ten minutes maybe, and he had a jug of wine and some cigarettes. He had gone over to the Officer's homes and went in one of the homes and got these cigarettes and wine and brought it back. And he said, "Everybody light up a cigarette and take one swallow of wine." They passed the bottle down and we did that, and he talked to us then, and said the safest place for us was to stay where we were because there was nothing we could do if we crawled our anyway; so don't go running all over Ford Island.

Q: About how many men were there in the trench with you?

A: I would say there were about 25 of us in that particular trench.

Q: Were they all from the *Utah*?

A: All from the *Utah*... every one.

Q: Did oil leak out of the Ship onto the water?

A: No, to my knowledge we had no oil leakage at all. We had no explosions or anything. It just completely just rolled over... and we stayed in there until the Attack was over. My only

recollection of seeing planes after that was a few of them that flew over still strafing or coming from one side or the other. Then when the high flying bombers came in, you could see them up above you. Of course, your first thought was they're right above us; a bomb is going to come right down and drop into this trench. But of course they weren't interested in that particular side of the Island any more, because basically they were after the battleships and so forth. So nothing came close to us.

Q: What did you do after the Attack was over?

A: Well after the Attack was over, we got out and we marched across Ford Island to the docks, over by now where the Chief of Naval Operations is. It was in that vicinity, and they took quite a few of us on boats and we then went across to the other side. I would say probably 25 or 30 of us they put on the *Argonne* for the night, and told us that they would feed us and they would try and find any clothes or anything. Of course we were bare footed by that time; they'd try to find something for us. At least we might be able to get a sandwich and we would stay on watch that night. So we spent the night on the *Argonne*. We were on there that night and I was standing in a gun crew when our own planes came over that night. We proceeded to do a pretty good job on them, because everybody was pretty touchy and somebody didn't follow procedures. Some of them said the planes didn't do right, some of them said we didn't do right, but anyway, we proceeded to shoot down quite a bit of our own planes.

Then the next day they came and took us off and put us in a barracks. We spent the day in the barracks. They then found us some shoes and a couple of other change of clothes, and put us on a burying party.

Q: What was that like?

A: Well, the first day it was not too bad. They took us up and I'm not sure of the area, they later told us it was Red Hill they took us to. Our job mainly was to try and identify the bodies that they had there. If we could find identification, we got it and we logged it. There was a man there logging it. We put a tongue depressor on the man's big toe with some information on it; then put them in a bag; then put them in a box; then they had the boxes shut. I was on it for about three days I guess, and by the 3rd day it was getting very, very rough because of the temperatures out there. The bodies were beginning to decompose and swell up. By this time they were bringing in fragments and pieces; they brought them out on a dump truck... I'll never forget that. They would just pull the chain on the dump truck just like it was a load of dirt and dump them out. And we had to try and sort them and find enough of what went with what to make an identification.

Q: It must have been pretty stressful.

A: It was the worst part, I believe, of my Navy career...was that day.

Q: How many days did you work on that burial detail?

A: I was on four days and on the morning of the fifth day they lined us up for our assignments again, and I assumed we'd be back on the burying party because there was still some more to go. But the boatswain mate and I don't even know to this day what ship he was from or anything, he announced that they wanted 50 volunteers. The minute he said 50 volunteers, there was a mad scramble to change from the group we were in to get to be one of the 50, because I knew anything was better than the burying party. It turned out we were volunteering for the USS *Detroit*. So, it was all (except for I think just a few) the whole 50 was *Utah* sailors that went on the *Detroit*. As soon as they could get us together and get our names they marched us down and we took a motor launch and went to the *Detroit*, and became a member of their crew. They had already been underway, of course, and come back in. The minute we got on there they were loading more ammunition. Only thing we knew, they had a report we were going into sea and we were going to be escorting some ships. We loaded ammunition and the following day went to sea. The escorting that we were doing turned out to be terrific, because we were escorting one of the passenger liners plus a couple of troopships with women and children, and we were coming back to the U.S. It seemed to me it was Christmas Eve or a couple days before. It seemed to me it was Christmas Eve but I know at the time we sailed under the Golden Gate Bridge into San Francisco. They left us; each side got to go on liberty and then we were back to sea again.

Q: Is there any particular incident, or any particular memory that stands out more than any other in your mind about Dec. 7th?

A: I just guess the incredibility of the fact that this could happen. Now I was on the *Utah*, and the *Utah* has been called various things from experimental ship, to a target ship, to whatever. And we were a little all of these things; we were a target ship, we were an experimental ship, we would get the first thing of anything the Navy wanted to try. So we had been out on maneuvers, we had been bombed by the miniature bombs, we had submarine detecting gear, we had been out with the fleet. And there was just these little things we'd hear from time to time that they were detecting sounds that weren't supposed to be there like a submarine that wasn't supposed to be in that area. And there were reports that the Japanese were sending ships into Honolulu, or on the way from the States to Honolulu, and a lot of the old Japanese were leaving. And there were these little things that made you feel like something was happening, but I guess the incredible thing was that it did happen; that they could possibly get there without us knowing it. It just didn't seem possible. That to me was the outstanding thing.

Q: Well, thank you. Appreciate you taking the time to come up here and talk to me.

A: I appreciate the chance.

